

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, EG, SHUM
SUBJECT: COPTIC DISQUIET

REF: (A) CAIRO 14878, (B) ALEXANDRIA 965

1. NEWS OF MUSLIM-COPT TROUBLES IN UPPER EGYPT WIDESPREAD AND INCLUDES INCIDENTS IN SOHAG AS WELL AS THOSE ALREADY REPORTED, ONLY TWO OF WHICH SPECIFICALLY CONFIRMED. BASIC CONCERN IN CAIRO COPTIC COMMUNITY SEEMS TO BE FEAR THAT APOSTASY PROPOSED ISLAMIC LEGISLATION (REF A) MAY EVENTUALLY BE PASSED AND ENFORCED, DESPITE WHISPERED ASSURANCES OF NON-ENFORCEMENT, AND THAT IT ADUBRATES IMPOSITION OF ISLAMIC LAW ON CHRISTIAN POPULATION. NEW RUMOR BEING PEDDLED IS THAT ONE COPTIC PRIEST IS TELLING CONGREGATION THAT JIHAN SADAT OFFERING 500 POUNDS CASH AND TRANSFER TO REAR ECHELON TO ANY CHRISTIAN SOLDIER WILLING TO CONVERT TO ISLAM. ANOTHER PRINCIPAL REASON COPTS PERCEIVE FOR TENSION IS ACTIVITIES OF MUSLIM EXTREMISTS, WITH ADDED FILLIP THAT GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN ON FANATICS SUCH AS TAKFIR MAY EVENTUALLY INVOLVE MUZZLING OF COPTIC PRIESTS WHO SPEAK OUT IN DEFENSE OF FAITH. SOME ALSO SEE MUSLIM REACTION TO

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PRESIDENT CARTER'S RECEPTION OF POPE SHANUDA AS CONTRIBUTING FACTOR.

2. ADDING TO CONCERN IS QUESTION OF PUBLIC TREATMENT. CAIRO PRESS STILL ALMOST TOTALLY SILENT ON SUBJECT OF ATTACKS AGAINST COPTIC CHURCHES IN SOUTH, AND ABSENCE OF COMMENTARY BY AKHBAR'S MOUSA SABRI (THE LEADING COPTIC

JOURNALIST) PARTICULARLY DISQUIETING. IN THIS CONNECTION, COPTS BELIEVE THAT PRSIDENT SADAT'S WARNING, IN HIS RECENT SPEECH IN MIT ABUL KOM, THAT ANYONE DESTROYING PUBLIC OR PRIVATE PROPERTY IS TO BE SHOT ON SIGHT WAS IN FACT VEILED REFERENCE TO ATTACKS ON CHURCHES. SPEECH FAILED TO HIT PRESS FOR TWO DAYS, AND THEN WAS FINALLY CARRIED ONLY BY AKHBAR, WHICH GAVE PROMINENCE TO ABOVE STATMENTS. IF PRESS ABLE TO TREAT SADAT PUBLIC STATEMENTS IN THIS MANNER, COPTS FEAR, ENFORCEMENT OF HIS POLICY MAY ITSELF BE IN DOUBT.

3. SITUATION MEANWHILE FEEDS UPON ITSELF AS COPTS BROOD ON OLD GRIEVANCES OF DISCRIMINATION IN GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SECTOR. THEY ALSO CLAIMING THAT RECENT GOE CENSUS SUBSTANTIALLY UNDER-REPORTED NUMBER OF COPTIC POPULATION BY SETTING IT AT 2.8 MILLION. COPTIC CLAIMS VARY BUT ARE ALWAYS MUCH HIGHER. (MOST CAIRO OBSERVERS AGREE THAT FIGURES SOMEWHAT LOW, BUT CONSIDER THIS TO BE RESULT OF BIAS BY INDIVIDUAL CENSUS TAKERS RATHER THAN GOE POLICY.) COMMUNITY AT ANY RATE CLOSING RANKS IN FACE OF PERCEIVED THREAT, WHICH HAS BECOME SUBJECT OF LENGTHY DISCUSSION AND SPECULATION BY KNOTS OF WORRIED COPTS IN PLACES WHERE THEY EMPLOYED IN NUMBER. BEST EXAMPLE IS THAT MANY APPARENTLY JOINING IN HOLY SYNOD'S CALL FOR DAILY FAST (REF A).

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4. COMMENT: AT THIS POINT, THERE SEEMS TO BE NO CONCERN THAT SADAT INTENDS TO BACK DOWN FROM HIS LONG HELD INSISTENCE ON CONFESSIONAL PEACE AND COOPERATION IN EGYPT. STILL, IN WAKE OF PUBLICITY GIVEN TO EXTENT OF MUSLIM EXTREMIST STRENGTH, COPTS BEGINNING TO FEAR THAT NATIONAL POLICY WILL BE SACRIFICED TO ISLAMIC PRESSURE. GOE HAS NOT YET MOVED TO REASSURE COPTS IN SUBSTANTIAL PUBLIC MANNER BUT CAN BE EXPECTED TO DO SO EVEN IF IT DECIDES TO WAIT FOR END OF RAMADAN. MEANWHILE, AS NOTED REF B, COPTS RESORTING TO ACTIVE LOBBYING. HOWEVER, THERE IS SOME DANGER THAT OVERREACTION OR SENSATIONALISM BY COPTS SUCH AS PRIEST PUSHING STORY ABOUT JIHAN SADAT MAY BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AND EXACERBATE SITUATON. EILTS

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